

Congressman questioning state's contribution to crosstown project

\$200 million needed for Interstate 40 work

By Steve Lackmeyer Staff Writer

With \$200 million still needed for reconstruction of the Interstate 40 crosstown expressway, Rep. Ernest Istook is questioning why no state funds have been committed to one of the most expensive highway projects in state history.

During a congressional legislative briefing Monday hosted by the Oklahoma City Council, Mayor Kirk Humphreys told Istook and Reps. J.C. Watts, RNorman, and Frank Lucas, RCheyenne, that obtaining full funding for the project is one of the city's most pressing needs.

Istook said he was surprised not to see any state funding added to the \$108 million in federal money already obtained for the highway relocation — especially in light of successful efforts to end or reduce Oklahoma's status as a "donor state" on fuel taxes.

"Part of the rationality with more money coming back to the state was that they would have the money to share in their participation in state projects," Istook said. "Yet I'm not seeing any state figures popping up (on I-40)."

Terri Angier, public affairs chief for the state Transportation Department, responded the state has always anticipated the crosstown expressway project would be federally funded — a beneficiary of "soft match credits."

The soft match credits, which Angier said are allowed by federal highway officials, allow the state to use other state-funded highway construction as matching funds. She said the state's \$1 billion road program is an example of soft match credits, as is the \$85 million reconstruction of the Broadway Extension between downtown Oklahoma City and Edmond.

"When we first started looking at the crosstown and planning it, we were very upfront in saying we were having to look at some sort of special funding for it because of the magnitude," Angier said. "The estimates on the crosstown, starting out, was equal to about one year of highway funding for the entire state."

Angier said obtaining full funding is important if the project is to be launched anytime soon.

"It's not a project you can do in pieces," Angier said. "They've (Istook, Watts and Lucas) really came through for us getting the \$108 million, and we can't be more appreciative of their efforts. However, the state matching won't take care of the entire \$200 million."

State transportation officials are awaiting approval of crosstown relocation plans from the Federal Highway Administration. Once the state gets the OK, which is expected later this spring, it can begin buying right of way and moving utilities along the route selected for a new ground-level section of highway.

The 10-lane expressway will run through an area south of downtown Oklahoma City. It will be nearly four miles long and in some places will run about five blocks south of the elevated crosstown it is replacing.

Watts said he agrees with Istook the state must participate in funding the project

"The longer we let it go, the higher the bill becomes," Watts said. "I doubt we can get all of the \$200 million in this appropriations cycle ... I think we'll get some funding to keep us on track."

Istook, Lucas and Watts all agreed the new highway is one of the state's most pressing needs.

"It is one of the most critical arteries of transportation, not only through Oklahoma City, across the state, but through the whole southwestern region," Lucas said. "But as the case has been proven, it's rather expensive project, we'll just have to keep on going."

Lucas said the possibility adding more federal dollars the project this year depends the direction of the overall federal budget — but he added is "optimistic."